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ABSTRACT

Recreation can play an important role in the rehabilitation process for disabled persons by building self-esteem within the disabled and creating feelings of admiration and acceptance within a community. Because of the diversity of the disabled population, they have no collective identity. Participation in recreational activities can give the disabled an identity, provide a sense of belonging, and help to generate life purpose and meaning. The staggering costs of supporting handicapped individuals can be reduced by rehabilitating disabled people so they may be employed. Recreation can serve as a stepping stone to the world of work by providing challenging opportunities in wild environments, which are a positive setting for developing many of the emotional, social, and intellectual skills that work demands. Individuals become more receptive to attitude change when participating in recreation. By observing disabled people participating in recreation, community attitudes toward the disabled become more positive. (KS)

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RECREATION AND THE OUTDOOR EDUCATOR: A MEANS OF INTEGRATION FOR PEOPLE WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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By

Tom Whittaker

Editors' note: The following was presented as part of PANEL #3: NON-PROFITS AND SPECIAL POPULATIONS. A transcription of the question and answer period can be found in Appendix B.

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Biographical Note

Whittaker, an amputee, founded the Cooperative Wilderness Handi-capped Outdoor Group (C. W. HOG) at Idaho State University in 1981 and directed the program until 1990. The program is dedicated to creating a four wheel drive attitude in people with physical disabilities. This community-based program uses real adventures in remote places to promote personal growth. Currently Whittaker is working on a Ph.D. through the School of Occupational and Educational Studies at Colorado State University.

Synopsis

This article takes the stance that the majority of disabled people in North American society are limited in their opportunities to achieve a meaningful place in the economic and social fabric of this nation. This is the result of attitudes held by both able-bodied and disabled segments of the community. These attitudes stem from an identity crisis, lack of education, or misguided attempts to help.

The part recreation plays in the rehabilitation process is examined with special reference to the role of the educator that uses the outdoors as a medium to build self-esteem within the disabled and create feelings of admiration and acceptance with a community.

Who Are The Disabled

The federal government defines a handicapped person as "an individual who has a physical or mental impairment that limits one or more major life activities. . . Also covered are mental or psychological disorders, such as mental retardation, organic brain syndrome, emotional or mental illness and specific learning disabilities" (U. S.Government, 1981).

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Identity Crisis

Unlike other minorities, the disabled population has no collective identity. Grouping is determined by eligibility for a certain type of social security. The sub-groups, within the whole, cannot relate to one another, have little empathy for one another, and more often than not, dislike being categorized together. Thus, many physically challenged persons resent being grouped with persons who possess profound intellectual and emotional disabilities, AIDS patients, etc.

The lack of empathy experienced in our technological society by people with disabilities makes it very difficult for them to create an identity of which they can feel proud. This in turn creates a situation in which they become stuck in the transitional phase. A time when the human organism experiences a great deal of stress, ambiguity, confusion, and unhappiness (Toffler, 1970). These life transitions are times when one's self image is under assault. The transitional impasse in which many disabled people find themselves is somewhat like a hermit crab caught between shells--the old no longer fits, but the new is nowhere in sight. Instead of a shell to protect our vulnerability, we need an identity, a persona that is true to our existing circumstances, yet one of which we can justifiably feel proud. In order to create this identity, it is essential that individuals have access to people and activities with which they can identify in order to give their life purpose and meaning.

The Economics of Disability

The economics of disability are staggering. President Reagan stated in his proclamation on May 7, 1986, that "36 million Americans suffer from some form of handicap." According to the 1970 census, the last time information was gathered nationally on people with handicapping conditions, only two million of this population earned more than $7,000 a year. This means that we support on welfare--in hospitals, homes, etc.--more disabled people than the entire population of Canada.

Rogh (1984) states, "The megabucks--a reported $70 billion in 1980--which are sometimes cited as expenditures in the disability field, are not found in the service programs but in the income maintenance/health insurance outlays . . . Only a study of individual state budgets could provide us with insights of how much the nation spends in the disability field."

When state allotments are combined with federal dollars, the $70 billion figure could conceivably be doubled. Yet only two million disabled Americans earn subsistence wages. These figures suggest that present attempts to integrate disabled persons into the fabric of American society are a miserable (for the disabled) and costly (for the nation) failure. As educators and as concerned individuals, we must not only bear the expense but also a portion of the responsibility.

Education Versus Welfare

The solution to a problem of this magnitude is complex and not totally reversible. For many disabled persons, we will have to provide an extensive amount of care. However, according to the U. S. Government (1981), 7.2 million members of this population could be working and are not.

American taxpayers no longer can afford to support welfare programs for individuals who would rather be contributing members of society. However, we do need to support programs that effectively enable people with disabilities to maximize their potential. If we educate society and create effective strategies, many people with disabilities who are not working could be gainfully employed. These strategies must not only allow disabled people to complete their personal rehabilitation but also address the attitudes of the able-bodied community.

Before disabled people can complete their personal rehabilitation, they need to establish a positive identity both collectively and as individuals. Once people with disabilities have a realistic understanding of their gifts and capabilities they are more likely to become contributing members of society, excited about life's possibilities, and ready to risk themselves in a work environment.

Recreation: A Stepping Stone to the World of Work

Placing a greater number of handicapped people permanently in the workforce not only reduces the massive bill paid in disability pensions, but also provides a positive contribution to the economy. Policymakers must recognize the economic and humanitarian importance outdoor recreation can play in strengthening an individual suffering the physical and emotional deprivations caused by disability in American society.

Independent government agencies, educators, and private organizations for many years have recognized the importance of recreation for disabled individuals. The U. S. Department of the Interior (1981) stated, "The importance of recreation to the handicapped person cannot be overstated. Because many handicapped persons are not able to work at regular jobs or are discriminated against in trying to get them, many are deprived of the chance to meet mental, physical, and emotional challeges which the general population regularly experiences.

Hal O'Leary, director of the world's largest adaptive ski programs, said in an interview, "They (the federal government) view what we do here as just frills." This is an attitude towards recreation and sporting endeavor for people with disabilities that is constantly heard by sport and outdoor recreation professionals throughout the country.

Recreation: Misunderstood and Devalued

Although the mission statement of the Federal Department of Vocational Rehabilitation includes the provision of recreational opportunities as part of the socialization of disabled persons, a very small fraction of the annual $2.85 billion budget is spent on such provisions.

On February 3, 1986, the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons (AAOS) issued this position statement: "We feel that there is a desperate need for public education on the subject (recreation for the disabled) . . . the general public is either limited in its knowledge of these activities or views such programs as frivolous or potentially harmful." It would appear that this attitude is not only prevalent among the general populace, but also within recreation professionals and government bodies providing support services for disabled persons as borne out by Hutchinson and (Lord, 1983). Reporting on the status of recreational services for handicapped persons, the study examines the low priority most municipalities and recreation professionals give to programming for special populations while demonstrating the potential for disabled persons to participate in recreational programs was great.

Hans Selye, M.D., considered by many as the father of understanding stress in the human organism, states (1974) that "the aim of human existence is to create and maintain an identity, express innate abilities and drives, remain healthy, have a purpose, to be proud of oneself, and earn the respect of others." He believes that by doing this we also fulfill what we consider to be our purpose. He states emphatically that mankind must work as a biological necessity. If denied this vital need, the organism will atrophy and perish. "To function normally man needs work as he needs air, food, sleep, social contacts, and sex."

It is the author's belief that challenging recreational opportunities in wild environments can provoke a positive setting for developing many of the emotional, social, and intellectual skills that work demands. In addition, these experiences help to build a positive self-concept based on a realistic assessment of one's capabilities. It is this ability that high quality, self-directed outdoor adventure recreation has for assisting in personal growth and identity-imaging that is the cornerstone of the process.

Creating Empathy Through Recreation

The author has noticed in sixteen years of practical experience, gained on three continents, that recreation tends to have a marked effect on human nature. Individuals seem to shed their unreceptive attitudes that prevail when they are at work. Their convergent, task-oriented behavior is replaced by a more divergent, caring, receptive nature. This, I believe, is a time when people's internal processing systems are most receptive to new ideas and change.

This was borne out in an interview with "H" Hilbert, a former outdoor program director and presently a professional fishing guide, "I have more energy, will power and self-confidence as a result of my involvement with the HOGs . . . when I see the physically impaired on the ski slopes or negotiating rapids in paddle drafts, which they've helped design, it makes me feel as though I better get on with it and do something with my life."

Once able-bodied members of a community observe disabled citizens lap swimming, playing water polo, weightlifting, scuba diving, sailing, skiing, rock climbing, horse packing, refereeing softball tournaments, fishing, hunting, making jewelry, or playing instruments in an orchestra, their natural curiosity is often accompanied by feelings of admiration. This, in turn, creates attitudes of acceptance that tangibly can translate into employment opportunities.

The Supportive Recreation Group: A Means of Integration

All too often, for many traumatically disabled persons, the rehabilitation unit is a steam catapult and society a brick wall. Although we are very effective at hitting the wall, we are not yet achieving our aim of integration, or so current employment figures and federal expenditures would suggest. A supportive outdoor recreation group can be the catalyst which provides the identity that circumstance has taken away, and can also act as a cushion between the institution and the real world, softening the landing and providing a sense of belonging. Within such groups individuals practice skills and competencies, build self-esteem, and become physically and emotionally robust. By doing so, the disabled create a climate conducive to acceptance within the community they wish to access: feelings of admiration and respect.

Conclusion: Become Part of the Solution

The problems facing disabled populations are largely attitudinal. These attitudinal barriers belong to both disabled and able-bodied segments of society. Where attitudes of a nation are concerned, educators need to take the lead. Society, for the most part, is comprised of able-bodied individuals who need some insights into the problems from a disabled individual's point of view. In a decade Green Peace opened the world's eyes to the plight of whales and harp seals by making us realize a problem existed and by appealing to our common sense. They have done this not with cutsey imagery but by giving us the facts and appealing to our human decency.

Disabled people cannot become part of an ambivalent society; the wraps must be taken off disability. We as a nation have to face the fact of disability and seek strategies that include these people as productive independent beings. The people that hold privileged places in our society to do this are educators. The old adage that "If you're not part of the solution, you are part of the problem" has never been more true.

Finally, let us not confuse outdoor recreation with entertainment. This is not just fun and games, and certainly not frills. It is the pivotal point of a two-way process that, when

used correctly, can enrich a nation by changing attitudes and by opening perceptual doors. We see President Bush jogging, throwing baseballs, and fishing. This apparently is an important part of his life and public image as president of this nation. It should be apparent that active recreation is an important aspect of every citizen's life; this is not a privilege of the young or wealthy, but a fundamental birth right of every person in a free country.

Sport and recreation, after perhaps money and sex, is one of the most potent driving forces in our society. It has been demonstrated, through the work of programs like the Cooperative Wilderness Handicapped Outdoor Group (C. W. HOG), Challenge of Alaska, E.T.C. (Environmental Traveling Companions), and Wilderness Enquiry II, that a recreation program, encouraging responsibility and interpersonal relationships in remote outdoor environments, can create miraculous changes in an individual's self-esteem.

Before becoming a ski instructor for C. W. HOG program, Don Carr recalls, "I was watching a mud wrestling contest that took place between all the candidates before a homecoming king and queen are determined. Kyle Packer (a quadraplegic person who has cerebral palsy, is not ambulatory, has limited use of his arms, experiences some difficulty with his speech, and struggles with spasticity) was one of the candidates out there on his knees in all that mud. Not knowing Kyle, at that point, I had to figure nothing bothered Kyle. I was filled with admiration for him."

This ability to risk oneself and take part despite one's differences takes a supreme act of courage, which, when witnessed by others, can positively imprint not only on an individual but also on a community's values. I remember watching Kyle at the crowning ceremony at the homecoming football game later that week. When he had not been chosen as runner-up in the contest, I felt crushed and disappointed for Kyle if not resentful of his putting himself in a circumstance where he was almost guaranteed to be hurt. I was so wrapped up in my thoughts and projected feelings for Kyle that the announcer's words seemed fuzzy and distant. It was as if I'd been hit with a cattle prod, and I found myself on my feet along with a near-capacity crowd cheering and whistling. Kyle's arms were raised in a victory salute.

Untypically, the majority of the crowd had stayed to witness the outcome of this particular homecoming gala, and now their deafening applause was honoring Kyle's guts and tenacity. In three years, Kyle had made the transition from a social recluse to someone a large proportion of the student body knew and cared for. They had shown their admiration and affection by voting Kyle Idaho State University's homecoming king.

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